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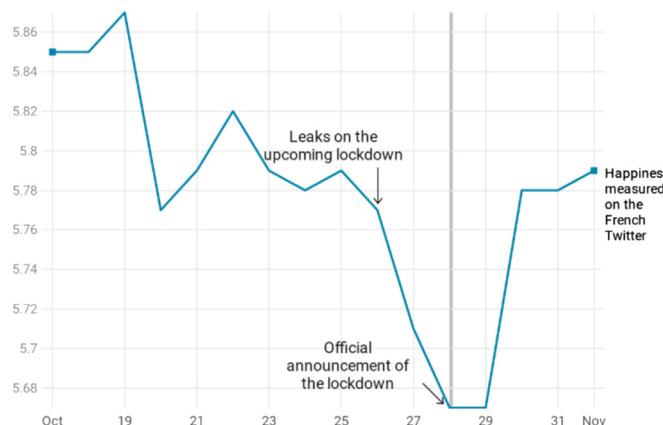
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Governing by press release?



Acceptability and compliance with the measures taken against COVID-19 are major concerns. Public health deciders can be faced with a lack of understanding of the danger posed by the virus, resistance towards drastic measures, and overall complacency [1]. How can the population be most effectively enrolled in the fight against the pandemic? Deciders and academics across the globe are searching for answers to this question. In their quest, they understandably turn their gaze beyond the medical sphere, drawing upon the experience and knowledge developed in other social domains, such as marketing and politics, in which mobilising the public is a central issue.



The French President and government have recently given a perfect example of how the tools of political communication can be applied to the current pandemic situation. On October 28th at 8 P.M, President Emmanuel Macron announced a new lockdown. That said, the media had wasted no time commenting on the new measures over the previous two days. They cited several sources “close to the government”, an admission indicating that the deciders had voluntarily leaked this information as had already been the case at earlier stages of the epidemic [2]. The “leaking” of soon-to-be-announced policy is a common feature in French policy-making [3]. It permits assessment of the public reaction and addition of last-minute adjustments designed to avoid major opposition. In the case of the latest French lockdown, the media was provided with an opportunity in the run-up to the Macron speech to emphasise the degradation of the epidemic situation.

Should we condone this pragmatism? We believe that orchestrated leaks highlight the dangers of applying to health issues the procedures designed for other contexts. When it comes to health, people's decisions are endowed with a much stronger sense of urgency than when engaging with a policy proposal; a much more pronounced sense of importance than when choosing which snack to buy.

Psychologists and economists have shown that providing people with incomplete or unreliable information results in anxiety, frustration and disengagement [4]. In the case of France, there is evidence to suggest that leaking of information, before the official announcement of a second lockdown, exposed people to painful dilemmas and anxiety without giving them a voice in any decision on a new course of action.

Each day, the “hedonometer” evaluates the overall happiness of a random sample of 10% of posts on the French Twitter by analysing people's emotional states; this is known as “sentiment mining” [5]. Looking back on the last two weeks of October, we can clearly see that the leaks were associated with a decline in emotional state among Twitter users, meaning that people were grappling with the idea of another lockdown (Fig. 1 Graph 1). But did this result in a longer and more beneficial period of preparation? Google search trends suggest otherwise. In Fig. 1 Graph 2, we can observe the evolution of four Google search themes linked to lockdown preparation: National transportation companies, home improvement retailers, supermarkets, and partial unemployment. People seem to have waited for official announcements before engaging in actual decision-making.

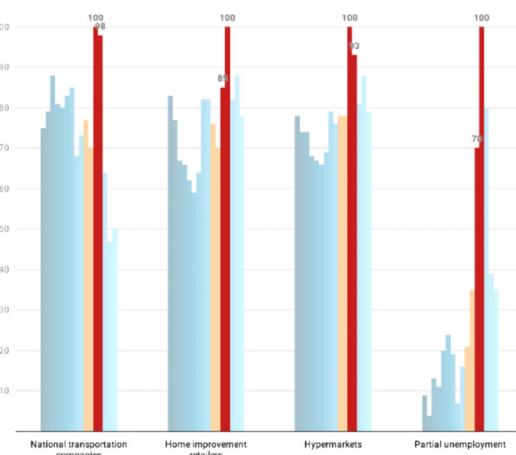


Fig. 1. On the left, graph 1 presenting the evolution of the “degree of happiness” expressed on Twitter in France as measured by sentiment analysis or opinion mining on the University of Vermont “Hedonometer”. Data extracted for the October 17th – November 1st period. On the right, bar graph 2 presenting the evolution over the same period of Google searches in France regarding four themes: national transportation (SNCF, Air France); home improvement retailers (Castorama, Leroy Merlin, Weldom, Brico dépôt), supermarkets (Auchan, Carrefour, Leclerc, Lidl, Super U) and partial unemployment. The period between the leaks and the official announcement is highlighted in orange, while the official announcement day and the day after are highlighted in red.

Beyond orchestrated leaks, many health interventions against COVID-19 have been premised on providing the public with partial information. For instance, members of the French government's behavioural insights' team, known as the "nudge unit", explained that, when drawing up the form that people would need to complete in order to go outside during the lockdown, in an attempt to deter movement the authorities deliberately refrained from indicating all authorised options. The unclarity of guidelines was confusing not only for the public, but also for law enforcement, leading some policemen to prevent people from buying newspapers [6]. This type of uncertainty weighs heavily on those who lack the resources to find reliable sources of information, without which they run the risk of violating the rules and being fined.

Epidemics create a tremendous amount of uncertainty among governments and the public alike. Providing the population with the best information conducive to an informed choice is a major responsibility of public health deciders. It might be tempting for them to provide only partial information or to over-emphasise certainty in view of obtaining short-term positive behavioural effects. Unfortunately, it also impels people to speculate about future decisions and what they can or cannot do. Such communication strategies devalue the authorities' voice, fuel rumours and cast doubts on their ability to manage a crisis in real time [7]. Not only is this likely to negatively affect long-term trust in official messages, but it can also have consequences that do not appear in statistics pertaining to COVID monitoring such as isolation of vulnerable persons or a decline in civic engagement.

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Ethical statement

This work does not necessitate approval by an ethics committee as no personal information was gathered.

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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